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AUTHOR Mhathuna, Maire Mhic
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated factors facilitating acquisition of Irish in Irish-medium playgroups designed for children who are native English-speakers. Data were gathered in four visits each to two such playgroups, each containing approximately 20 children. Four aspects of conversational exchanges were examined: understanding; code mixing; formulaic speech; and creative speech. Characteristics of the language use contexts were also considered. Results indicate all the children observed reached the stage of using formulaic phrases in the context in which they were taught, with a small proportion able to expand the use of formulas to other, unrelated contexts or to break them down into constituent parts. A smaller number yet showed an ability to manipulate knowledge they had in order to communicate creatively. Wide variation in language ability meant teachers had to tailor input to each child's competence level. Through a mixture of whole-group, small-group, and individual interaction, the teachers were able to do this a significant portion of the time. A critical turning point appeared when the children moved away from formulaic phrases in taught contexts to using the same formulas in novel and unrelated contexts and to using more creative speech. Contains 15 references. (MSE)

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SLA Before ABC: Factors Facilitating Second Language Acquisition in Irish-Medium Playgroups

Máire Mhic Mhathúna
Dublin Institute of Technology
Cathal Brugha Street

INTRODUCTION

Irish-medium playgroups or *naíonraí* were founded over 20 years ago with the twin aims of developing the child's potential through play and the acquisition of Irish as a Second Language (Ó Murchú 1985: 13). The research carried out to date has focused on aspects other than the process of Second Language learning. Given the author's ten years experience as a *naíonra* teacher, she decided to investigate the actual process of acquisition when writing a Master in Education thesis (Mhic Mhathúna 1993). The aim of the study was to identify some factors that were facilitating the acquisition of Irish as a second language in *naíonraí*, looking in particular at the role of input and interaction in the acquisition of Irish as a second language by young children. This paper attempts to summarise the scope and findings of the study. Input has been defined by Ellis (1986: 127) as

> the language addressed to the L2 learner by either a native speaker or by another L2 learner. **Interaction** consists of the discourse jointly constructed by the learner and his interlocutors; input therefore is the result of interaction.

In the context of the present paper, the language spoken by the teacher to the children and the type of discourse and conversation in which they partook were considered to be of primary importance.

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The research by Seliger (1983), Snow (1977), Wagner-Gough (1975), Hatch (1983) and others was studied to identify the particular aspects of Input and Interaction that were considered to facilitate SLA as well as quantitive and qualitative studies of actual classroom practice. Lily Wong-Fillmore's (1985) research was particularly helpful here as were case studies of Second Language kindergartens by Weber and Tardiff (1991) and by Vesterbacka (1991). The Irish research by Owens (1992) and by Hickey (1993) also offered many valuable insights. The main aspects of Input and Interaction identified by these researchers were:

The amount and frequency of Input.

The modifications made by competent speakers when talking to learners, including Foreigner Talk and Teacher Talk.

Conversational scaffolding and dual construction of conversation that Scollon (1979) refers to as Vertical and Horizontal Constructions.

Two *naíonraí* were selected for the study, using predetermined criteria and four visits were paid to each of them within a six week period, from April to May 1992, for the three hour duration of a session. There were two adults in charge of each group of approximately 20 children, one teacher or *stiúrthóir* and one assistant. Two children were chosen in each *naíonra* as the primary focus of observation, though this did not preclude observation of other children. The sessions were audio-taped and 12 hours were transcribed in full. This data was then analysed in order to see which factors were facilitating SLA.

The conversational exchange was chosen as the unit of analysis because this was the most natural and most frequently occuring unit in the data. As the children were at the initial stages of acquiring a Second Language it was considered appropriate to study the data under the headings of Understanding, Code Mixing, Formulaic Speech and Creative Speech. A number of common features across the various headings were identified and are described below.

1. LARGE AMOUNT OF INPUT

The *naíonra* is a form of immersion education, that is all teaching and communication initiated by the teacher is carried out in Irish, the target language. The children attending the naíonra, therefore, received a large amount of input. This amounted to about 440 hours a year. Some of the children who spoke more creatively in Irish were attending the *naíonra* for a second year. At the time the research was carried out, the end of Term 2, they would have had approximately 740 hours exposure. This bears comparison with the amount of contact time with the language which is available to a child in primary school. A *naíonra* child has more than double the amount available to a pupil in an English-medium primary school and roughly half the amount available in an Irish-medium school. Nevertheless, this is considerably less than the exposure which a child has with his First Language, which Singleton (1989) estimates at 3,650 hours per year.

It was interesting to note that the children accepted that the teachers in the *naíonra* would speak in Irish. Indeed they expected them to do so. On one occasion a child mistakenly thought that the teacher used an English word and was visibly put out by this departure from practice (Mhic Mhathúna 1993: 151). Wong-Fillmore (1985:34) thinks that the separation of languages, with clear and obvious boundaries, is beneficial to the learner as it helps him to predict which language is appropriate for each occasion and to keep the two languages apart.

2. HIGH LEVEL OF REGULARITY

Wong-Fillmore (1985: 39) has also identified the significance of a high level of regularity, both in the presentation of lessons/activities and in the type of language used in the lesson itself, as being important to the Second Language Learner. The present study bears this out. This regularity allowed the children to predict

what they were to do

what the teacher would be saying in any routine situation

what they themselves were expected to say.

The teachers used a lot of repetition in their interactions with the children. Often they would ask the same question several times, but with minor changes to help the child understand. This negotiation of meaning is another important aid to acquisition.

The children recognised the regular pattern of questions that the teachers used. The teachers rarely changed the question pattern they used in the matching card game, for example. At least some of the children had worked out a strategy of anticipating the next question and then answering that anticipated question, regardless of which one was actually asked, e.g.

Teacher: Aon, dó, trí, ceathair, cúig. Cén dath é sin? [One, two, three, four, five. What colour is it?]

Child: **Cúig.** [Five.]

This type of response allows us to suppose that the pattern of prediction can be helpful in the early stages of SLA as long as the teacher keeps to the rules!

One *naíonra* in particular used the Lunch Ritual to teach a wide range of formulaic utterances. The formulas were learned by the children as unanalysed chunks at first. However the sheer familiarity of these formulas in easily understood contexts and the many opportunities for participation allowed some of the children to start to break down and analyse the construction of the utterance:

Child 1: **Bainne ólta.** [Milk drunk.]

Child 2: That's not **bainne**. It's **oráiste**.

These formulaic utterances were composed and used by the teachers in a deliberate and predetermined way to allow the children to partake in routine interactions through Irish. Referring to First Language Acquisition, Hickey (1993) states that child constructed formulas are difficult to identify and none were found in the data. However, there are many examples of two and sometimes three turns in a card-game for

example, being enacted by the children among themselves entirely through Irish, using taught formulaic utterances (Mhic Mhathúna: 212).

3. CHILDREN'S NEED/OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK

The children spoke in Irish when they wanted to promote their own position in some way, eg. to ask for help or to attract the teacher's attention. Some children were well able to provide these opportunities for themselves but shy or reticent children needed to have the opening made for them, by being asked to say a formulaic phrase in a game or during a routine activity. Wong-Fillmore (1985: 41) concurs with the need for this type of provision and of gentle social pressure in order to promote production of the Second Language, especially for quiet children.

The need to speak, for whatever reason, appeared to be far more significant than the frequency of particular items in the input. Several other formulaic phrases appear with the same frequency in the teacher's input but only those that satisfy a particular need occur in the children's production.

4. ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The teachers observed were very enthusiastic and diligent about their task of providing the children with as many opportunities as possible to both hear and speak Irish. They created a warm, secure environment where the children knew that their efforts would be both welcome and accepted. The fact that the teachers rarely corrected a child's efforts at speaking Irish directly probably helped to boost the children's confidence. Instead, they repeated the child's utterance through Irish if it was in English or expanded it if it was a one or two word utterance in Irish. Above all, they showed that they were interested in WHAT the child had to say, as well as HOW he said it.

The teachers used the many opportunities for incidental talk to the full. They spoke in a clear, simple way, with one proposition per utterance. The meaning was usually clear from the context as most topics of conversation related to the current situation. The teachers were the main source of the Second Language. There was one competent Irish-speaking child in each naíonra and while they spoke Irish to the teachers they spoke in English to their peers as communication was their aim. It follows

therefore that the language learning was to take place while interacting with the teacher on an individual or group basis. It seemed that the majority of the children got most accessible input when this interaction took place on a small group basis. However, there were the usual constraints on the type of interaction that can take place in a group setting, such as following an individual child's interest while still maintaining the attention of the whole group, as detailed by Cicognani and Zani (1992).

The value of Directed Input, that is the modifications that the teacher made to her speech to suit the level of a particular child, proved to be significant for children who had reached a certain threshold level of competence. The threshold level in this instance would seem to be complete familiarity with the formulaic utterances and an ability to identify individual words within them. In holding conversations with these children, the teacher was able to offer a personal conversation scaffold to the child, building frames where the child could fill in the spaces. As the conversation progressed, in the vertical fashion outlined by Scollon, the teacher was able to reduce the level of support as the child showed increased competence, thus allowing him to speak in an unprompted manner e.g.

Teacher:	Cá mbíonn sé (an phéist)? Ins an ..
	[Where is it (the worm) In the ...
Child:	Féar. [Grass]
Teacher:	Agus cá mbíonn an phéist? [And where is the worm?]
Child:	Ins an féar. [In the grass]

A large amount of input was also made available to the children through the whole group activities, such as games, dancing and the lunch-time ritual. These were teacher-directed activities, but they were based on the children's interests. Wong-Fillmore's (1985: 24) research shows that where the teacher is the main source of SL, mainly teacher-directed education is more beneficial to language acquisition than the individual/child-centred model.

5. ROLE OF THE PARENTS

By the very fact of choosing to send their children to a *naíonra*, the parents showed that they were favourably disposed towards Irish and

towards their children learning Irish at a young age. Parents cited an interest in Irish as the main reason they sent their children to a *naíonra*, rather than to another type of pre-school (Mhic Mhathúna 1993: 234). Detailed answers to a questionnaire and their verbal behaviour in the *naíonra* itself showed that they knew which words, phrases, and songs the children knew and understood.

Many parents spoke some Irish to their children in the *naíonra*. For example, most said good-bye in Irish and received a reply in Irish. They also spoke in Irish to the teachers, according to their ability. Some also continued to speak in Irish to their children when they returned home or when they referred to the *naíonra*. Owens (1992) also refers to this phenomenon of the *naíonra* as an institution promoting the use of Irish within the family.

6. VARIATION IN CHILDREN'S LINGUISTIC ABILITY

There was wide variation in the children's linguistic ability. All of the children showed either through action or through replying appropriately in English, that they understood what the teachers said to them. They also showed that they understood the special vocabulary pertaining to the naíonra and the activities carried out therein. Surprisingly, there was very little code-mixing, as the most frequently occurring phrases appeared to have been taught as formulas. All of the children could all use the formulaic phrases in their basic context.

Some children were able to use words and phrases outside the context in which they were first acquired. One child told the teacher that she saw **capalls** [horses] in the field beside her house and the same child used a formulaic phrase 'Cé leis é seo', [Who owns this?] to gain attention for herself. This need for self-promotion also prompted a boy to inform the teacher that another child was running around the room: **Donnchadh is ag rith.** [Donnchadh is running.] **Ag rith** was a phrase from a story that particularly appealed to the children and that they obviously heard very often. One of the most creative exchanges was also initiated by the same book. One of the boys 'read' the story by describing the action in each picture and gave a very creditable rendering of the tale, using and re-using a small stock of phrases in a most creative fashion.

SUMMARY

In summary all of the children observed reached the stage of using formulaic phrases in the context in which they were taught. The data shows evidence that a small number, perhaps a fifth or so, of the children were able to expand the use of the formulas to other unrelated contexts or to break them down into their constituent parts. A smaller number again were able to manipulate the knowledge they had to communicate in a creative manner. Other children may have had similar competence but did not show it during the study.

This wide variation in language ability meant that the teachers had to tailor their input to suit each child's level of competence. It was important that each child received an appropriate level of input in order to progress. But it was also important that too much pressure was not exerted on the learners before they were ready to produce utterances in their Second Language. Through a mixture of whole group, small group and individual interaction, the teachers observed were able to suit their input to the individual child's level, at least for a significant part of the time.

It would seem from the present study that the crucial turning point or pivot in acquiring Irish in *naíonraí* was when the children observed moved away from using formulaic phrases in taught contexts to using the same formulas in novel and unrelated contexts and to using more creative speech. The child's need for self-promotion and communication along with the real interest and support of the teachers as shown in their acceptance of the children's efforts and the language scaffolding they gave them, facilitated the acquisition process. More widespread and more long-term research is needed to study the process of acquisition before any conclusions can be drawn as to what the main factors facilitating acquisition on a broader front than the case study here described are. The present study offers a starting point, a method of analysis and it is hoped some pointers as to the direction of continuing research.

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